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Sorry Pope, It Hasn't Worked



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I apologize, but His Holiness's "I am truly sorry" has not persuaded his Irish flock. Regrettably, victims have already denounced it as inadequate, and the pastoral letter promises to be a PR disaster.

Irish dissatisfaction has as much to do with the message's presentation as with its substance. The Pope's letter is twenty pages long but contains only one mention of the word 'sorry': buried at the middle of page 7. Addressing the victims of abuse, he says, "You have suffered grievously and I am truly sorry."

I'm sorry to nitpick, but is he only apologizing for the suffering experienced by the Irish victims of sexual abuse? What about the actions of his priests or the lack of oversight? What about the cover-up and protracted refusal to acknowledge responsibility? What about the dearth of punishment?

To be fair to the pontiff, he does say, "I openly express the shame and remorse that we all feel." Chastising the priests for betraying the trust of "innocent young people and their parents," he urges them to "examine your conscience, take responsibility for the sins you have committed, and humbly express your sorrow."

Forgive me, but hasn't His Holiness said enough then?

The problem is that he just cannot win with an apology. Reaction from Ireland must have forced the Pope to ruefully recall the inimitable words of P.G. Wodehouse: "It is a good rule in life never to apologize. The right sort of people do not want apologies, and the wrong sort take a mean advantage of them." Clearly, the apology is a strange animal offering little satisfaction to anyone: damned if you do and damned if you don't! Apologies are even more problematic when relationships of trust are involved. As the poet William Blake noted, "it is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend."

What then is the point of an apology? Some wrong has already been committed and cannot be undone. Why insist on apologies? Why not just move on? Why did Bill Clinton, Tiger Woods, Serena Williams, David Letterman, Thierry Henry, John Edwards, and many others apologize in recent times? Why did Australia apologize to the Aborigines? What compelled Japan to say sorry to China? And the Queen to the Maoris? Indeed so pervasive is our "culture of apology" that we are supposedly living in "an age of apology".

Inevitably, cynicism is the result. Distinguishing sincere apologies from cheap talk is difficult when there is an apology overload. Still, African-American leaders continue to insist on an apology for slavery, as do many other groups all over the world. So the humble apology must serve some purpose.

Research establishes the crucial role played by apologies in redressing wrongs. Experiments show that most victims - even children - are more likely to forgive after an apology than without one. Apologies force wrongdoers to accept responsibility, convey repentance, and offer a way to reconcile with the victim. They are painful because the accused has to face up to his wrongs and experience the humiliation that follows an admission of responsibility. Quite separate from the social and legal consequences of wrongdoing, an apology is also a form of self punishment.

Successful apologies yield reconciliation, allowing accuser and accused to move forward, shedding the burden of the wrong committed.

Issuing an apology alone is not enough. While it does allow the accused to accept responsibility, reconciliation is only possible if the victim accepts the apology. Acceptance depends on sincerity demonstrated by the accused, some evidence that he has received his just deserts, and a willingness to rehabilitate the offender.

There is no suggestion that the Pope's letter is insincere. It took a long time coming and must have been difficult to issue. Yet, reaction has been markedly different to what ensued after Pope John Paul's famous apology in March 2000. The dichotomy might have many explanations. John Paul II was a veteran of the apology - he issued over one hundred of them during his pontificate - and he typically stuck to generalities in the distant past. Ranging from apologies for the persecution of Galileo to the Jubilee apology to ethnic groups for "contempt for their cultures and religious traditions" to women who "all too often [were] humiliated and marginalised," there was not much risk of opening up demands for reparations. Irritant offenders and determined victims didn't pose many difficulties either. Apology alone seemed to be enough, particularly from a Pope with a unique connection with people around the world.

Pope Benedict is less fortunate. He has to deal with angry victims demanding that offenders receive their just deserts. Irish hostility is rooted in this inexorable human desire for justice. While the pontiff asks priests to "openly acknowledge guilt and submit to the demands of justice", there is no mention of accountability or compensation. Words alone are not sufficient in the Emerald Isle.

The Vatican's apology is also weak on the reconciliation front: the Pope is "confident" that by "drawing nearer to Christ and by participating in the life of his Church," victims "will be able to find reconciliation, deep inner healing and peace."

This confidence appears to be misplaced. He underestimates the deep anger and demand for accountability in Ireland. In asking victims to simply turn to religion and the Church for reconciliation - when their faith has been shattered - the message of apology is undermined.

An apology is most potent when it is simple, unequivocal, and offers something tangible in the form of reparation. An overly long letter with pious references to God's justice opens itself up to criticism as being no more than self-serving moralizing.

The sexual abuse scandal is a no-win situation for the Holy See. Following up the apology with a visit to Ireland to meet with the victims would reinforce sincerity by humanizing the message. This is especially important when the apology pertains to a group and the individual apologizing is not personally guilty. But a papal visit alone won't be enough. Concrete measures to prevent abuse in the future combined with reparations for victims are also necessary to facilitate reconciliation and forgiveness. The Church should also actively work with the state to bring those guilty of abuse to justice.

I'm sorry Pope, there are no easy answers, but you must seize the moment and go beyond mere words.